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ABSTRACT

Writing is a highly complex process requiring skills that are not possessed by all students. In some cases, students may have been taught writing skills before they were developmentally ready for them, thus diminishing their future ability to learn those skills. Some students may have specific learning disabilities, sometimes affecting only the process of writing, that prevent their written work from reflecting their true intellectual ability. Among the patterns of deficiency that may be seen in students' work are misspellings, which may be phonetically based, "bizarre," or reflective of an inablity to differentiate between sounds; problems with copying or revisualization of words or letters; problems with formulation and syntax that do not occur in oral language; and such errors as word omissions, incorrect word order and word usage, and lack of punctuation. To discover students with written language disorders, teachers should watch for discrepancies between oral and written work. Unless teachers are aware of the possibility of language learning disabilities, students with such disabilities may be labelled stupid, careless, or lazy and may be denied a chance at college educations. (GW)

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What Psychology and Special Education Have to Share with Teachers of Writing

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WHAT PSYCHOLOGY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

HAVE TO SHARE WITH TEACHERS OF WRITING

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You who have gathered for this conference do not have to be told that: "Writing is a highly complex process and, according to Myklebust, is one of the highest forms of language, hence, the last to be learned. It is a form of expressive language, a visual symbol system for conveying thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Normally, the child first learns to comprehend and use the spoken word and later to read and express ideas through the written word. Although oral and written expression are not identical, it can be assumed that the visual symbol systems (reading and writing) are learned by superimposing them on auditory language. 'Man has not always written, nor is writing the earliest phase of language development. When children write they are responding to an innate urge which has moved mankind in dynamic ways through the ages--it was the primeval urge to record human experience and preserve the story of man's adventures that gave impetus to the development of writing' (Zirbes: 1955, 2). Relatively little research has been done on written language, but the role of this form of verbal behavior in a world of mass communication is alerting educators of their responsibility to shift emphasis from skills to a dynamic language process because the ability to use written language requires many integrities, including adequate auditory language and experience on which to base the written form (Johnson and Myklebust: 1967, 193)."

The lack of those integrities is the area of concern which I wish to investigate with you today. Developmentally the human organism develops cephalo-caudally and proprioceptively, that is: beginning with the lifting of the head, the chest and so forth until mobility is achieved, and pro-prioceptively--literally from inside out. First the infant waves and kicks, using both arms and both legs, there is little or no control of those limbs at this early stage. As months pass, the infant learns to control one shoulder at a time, one wrist and finally the hand. He still has little finger control. This simplistic example of stages is important because of what it precedes.

Although educators have known for 40 years that writing is the last developmental skill acquired, it is often the first academic area we teach. Heaven help the kindergarten teacher who tries to teach her small charges to read, but virtually all of them teach writing--of the alphabet, the children's names, phone numbers and addresses. Yet when de Hirsch studied 37 possible predictors of success at 2nd grade level among kindergarten children, she found that IQ ranked 13. What was the best predictor? Pencil grip--a developmental stage. What does that matter to you? You teach adults, but I'll bet that many of you have students who not only still print but print atrociously.

There is some evidence which indicates that if a skill is taught too early, before the individual is developmentally capable of that

skill, his ability to ever learn that skill is diminished. Within your student groups, you are likely to find some of these students. (At this point participants will be asked to write their name taking a full two minutes to write it once. The result will resemble approximately the way they wrote in the 3rd grade, thus demonstrating that early motor patterns stay with us all our lives.) One of my students, with a Ph.D. in language came back to school to earn a Ph.D. in Special Education as well. Last year, after hearing lectures on disorders of written language, she told me how terrible she now felt about one of her former students. He was, she said, apparently very bright for he excelled in oral reports and clarity of thought. Therefore, she was aghast at receiving his first term paper which was replete with misspellings, disordered syntax, and mixed punctuation. Angered at what appeared to be a total lack of regard of conventional writing and of concern for one's work, she wrote unpleasant comments about his carelessness, the speed with which it must have been done, and so forth all over his paper. Now she felt that she had been very wrong, and should have looked deeper into the serious discrepancy between this young man's oral and written work, but she had not, and now it was too late. It was not a pleasant feeling.

I am here today because I hope that through sharing some of the knowledge of my discipline with you, you will not need to share her feelings.

Although I have been an English teacher, my specialty now is in the psychology of learning disabilities. Learning disabilities is basically a dysfunctioning of one or more processes in an individual's learning pattern. These specific difficulties in processing information may occur within a single learning system or through any combination of systems (auditory, visual, motor); at the perceptual, conceptual and/or expressive level; in quantitative thinking; in one or more of the various aspects of memory; in verbal and/or non-verbal skills; in attentional behaviors.

The consequence of these deficiencies and inconsistencies in processing information is a discrepancy between an individual's expected and actual achievement in the academic subjects such as reading, mathematics, composition, spelling, oral recitation and/or non-academic areas such as physical education, space and time judgements, listening, and personal relationships.

A specific learning disability is to be differentiated from a difficulty in learning resulting from mental retardation, severe emotional disturbance, bilingual-bicultural difference, experiential deprivation, sensory impairments, or orthopedic conditions, although specific learning disabilities may occur in combination with one or more of these disabilities (Learning Disabilities Manual: 1978, 12).

However, when I graduated from college, certified to teach English, French, and Speech, I had never even heard the term learning disabilities. Therefore, when I encountered poorly written papers, misspelled words and so forth, I believed just as did my student, that I was dealing

strictly with the results of low intellectual ability, carelessness or simply poor teaching in the lower grades. Probably, in most cases, one or more of those conditions was correct--but there were always the few who didn't "make sense," who seemed to show instances of intellectual ability far beyond what their written work would indicate. I never understood those.

"Certain learning disabilities occur only in the written form; other forms of verbal behavior are intact. The disturbances observed most frequently are of three main types: (1) A disorder in visual-motor integration; the person can speak and read but cannot execute the motor patterns for writing letters, numbers, or words. He may be able to spell orally but cannot express ideas by means of visual symbols because he cannot write. This condition is designated dysgraphia. (2) A deficit in revisualization; this individual recognizes words when he sees them and hence can read. However, he cannot revisualize letters or words, so he cannot write spontaneously nor from dictation. He cannot evoke the visual image from hearing the spoken from. (3) A deficiency in formulation and syntax; in this instance the person can communicate orally, can copy, can revisualize and spell words correctly, but he cannot organize his thoughts into their proper form for written communication. He does not write the way he speaks; he makes errors in written formulation that he does not make in speaking" (Johnson & Myklebust: 1967, 199).

Those are terms we use to define specific types of writing problems. "Terrific," you may think, "I thought I had students with writing problems now it sounds as though they have some sort of greek disease." So let's get away from terms and talk about specific patterns you may see in your student's work.

Spelling is a good place to start. Basically there are 2 methods for spelling: the first is a phonetic approach, wherein the letters are sounded and written in proper sequence. If an individual is good at this skill, there are still words he must learn to memorize because there are many words in English orthography which do not lend themselves to phonetic analysis. There are also many different and multiple sounds for may letters, so choosing the proper one may be a matter of guesswork. If you can "read" what the student is saying, even though the words are misspelled, your student is spelling phonetically and is not relying on visual memory for sequencing of the proper letters.

The second spelling pattern is called "bizarre," because the words do not necessarily bear a resemblance to what they are supposed to be. This pattern is found in those who try to remember how words are spelled visually, with no attempt at phonetic analysis. Their work is difficult to decipher precisely because it is "bizarre" and not phonetic. Some students will avoid using words they know they cannot spell and so lower the quality of their written work. When told to write creatively and not be concerned with spelling or punctuation, but with the idea of what is being written about, the beauty of their work is often striking. Creative writing is not the vehicle for correcting spelling, unless we want to stifle creativity.

Another form of this same problem area is the student who uses a word which is close to the correct word but the wrong choice, such as the use of the word 'wish' for 'witch.' Often, students who do this cannot hear the difference between those words. This is not necessarily a geographic or cultural factor, although in some cases it may be: usually such difficulties arise because of an inability to differentiate between sounds. There is no hearing loss per se. It is a problem in discrimination. The student with this difficulty will usually use the same words over and over, there is a marked paucity of vocabulary. "Their written language tends to be concrete and rarely above the level of the spoken," (Johnson & Myklebust: 1967, 195). A clue for you will be that these students can copy with no trouble.

The ability to copy is what differentiates the true dysgraphic student from other disorders of writing, for he can neither copy, write spontaneously nor from dictation without error. His is a problem of integration, in which there is an inability to transduce from what he sees to its written form. He knows what he wants to write and is usually verbally talented but he cannot get it down on paper. A way of helping this student is simply to teach him to say what he wants to write into a tape recorder and have someone else type or write it from the tape. This way we will discover how well he actually expresses himself and his claricy of thought instead of how well his visual-motor integration is working, for these students usually develop excellent verbal skills.

The problem of revisualization is different. This student can speak, read and copy, but he cannot revisualize words or letters. They cannot "see" them. They usually know when something is incorrectly written but do not know how to correct it. Perhaps an illustration will make this distinction clearer. For instance, when you want to write a word and you are unsure of its spelling, what sort of technique do you utilize? My daughter says she "sees" the words in her mind and simply reads off the letters. I cannot "see" a word in my head, I must write it down to check on spelling--I remember by the motor pattern. Some "sound out" the word. These are our coping mechanisms, but people with these learning problems difficulties do not have those coping mechanisms so they cannot adequately perform in written work.

The third major disorder is that of formulation and syntax. Again, the astute teacher will notice the discrepancy between oral and written work. Written work will show one or both of two patterns of difficulty. The first is that of what Johnson and Myklebust call "ideation and productivity." This condition is marked by the use of concrete language and limited output. One of the students with whom I am working illustrated this beautifully not long ago. She was given an assignment by her writing instructor to write a paper about her first day at SIU-C. The teacher wanted something such as "the day was hot and the air was stuffy as I stood with my registration cards in my hands waiting for the computer to type out my fate." What she got was: "I got up. I took a shower, then I ate breakfast. Then I went to register. Then I stood in a long line. Then I got my cards." etc.

Errors in the written form of language characterize the other major disorder in this area. Although some people show this disorder orally as well, most express this pattern only in their written work. The most common errors are in "word ommissions, disordered word order, incorrect verb and pronoun usage, incorrect word endings and lack of punctuation," according to Johnson and Myklebust, 1967, p. 229. I would add that in the college population with whom I work, I note a preponderance of syllabication problems, wherein a syllable appears in the wrong place within the word. Teachers report that these students do very well on tests of multiple choice or fill in the blanks but fail miserably on essay type questions.

It must be immediately obvious to you that all of the types of problems in writing which I have noted can be present in students who have no psychoneurological learning disability. These types of problems are noted in the culturally deprived, the retarded, bicultural children, and so forth. The difference which I ask you to note is that those with learning disabilities show a particular pattern in writing which does not appear in their oral work. Therefore, it is quite possible for the astute teacher to differentiate between the student who has not been taught or who has been deprived in some way, from the student who is experiencing a written language disorder. There is a difference.

Unfortunately, unless the teacher is aware of these differences, the student is usually presumed to be stupid or careless, lazy or the product of a less that "adequate" language culture. The tragedy which occurs as the result of this unfair, and uncorrect "labelling" can be devastating.

Not long ago I was chatting at a convention about my research project. Standing on the periphery of the group stood a faculty member at a University whom I did not know. Soon I began to gather my things to leave. This unknown gentleman slowly approached me and in sotto voce said: "I'm trying very hard to read your name tag but I cannot, because I have a learning disability. I can neither write nor spell." We talked for a long time and he told me of some of his experiences and of the devastation he had felt. He told me of the night when he and a friend had gotten very drunk and how he had confessed to this friend that he had a learning disability. After that evening, he was so ashamed that it was two weeks before he spoke to the friend again. What is so terrible about this situation is that this faculty member, an obviously successful, bright man, had had to get very drunk in order to tell his best friend of his disability. His reaction in telling was as if he were confessing to some horrible crime. Along the way, we teachers have conditioned these people so that they inately feel that there is something terribly wrong with them. Sometimes we need to be reminded of the tremendous power we hold in terms of selfconcept over those we try to teach. It is an awesome responsibility. I asked this man how he managed to get as many federal grants as he does. His answer was simple; he dictates most of his work and he has trained an excellent secretary to decipher his written work.

You see, although 25% of these people fall within the gifted range of measured intelligence, what we are actually saying is that they lack good secretarial skills. Yet, we have the power to deny them a chance at college educations only because they process material in different ways from the norm.

Language, oral and written, is generally assumed to be a left hemisphere function in most people and for many occupations, a high verbal ability, written or oral is not necessary. If they can get that far, these people, who seem to rely on the right hemisphere more than do we verbal teachers, go into fields where spatial abilities are required such as in engineering, and surgery. Verbal abilities are not critical there. But we know that 5 to 10% of our students, even those with high ability, may be presumed to fail in those first few years of higher education.

Let us make certain that because we care enough to look critically at all aspects of our students' learning, we no longer contribute to that failure.

Thank you.

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